

Ahead of Her Time

Hunt Was Early Pioneer for Children's Literature

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Even before she conferred the first Newbery Medal to Hendrik Willem van Loon for *The Story of Mankind* in 1922, Clara Whitehill Hunt kept the search for quality children's literature in the forefront of her mind.

During the 1921 American Library Association conference, she made her point—to celebrate Book Week and embrace the quality of children's literature; it was her support and collaboration with Fredric Melcher that eventually led to the advent of the John Newbery Medal. (*For more on their synergy, see Leonard Marcus's article on p. 3.*)

From Teacher to Librarian

Born in Utica, NY, Hunt (b. 1871) worked as a children's librarian and Superintendent of Work at Brooklyn Public Library in Brooklyn from 1903 to 1939. She began her career as an elementary school teacher and, inspired by her love of reading, switched her career to librarianship, and studied at the New York State Library School in Albany.

Her first job as a children's librarian was at the Apprentices' Library in Philadelphia in 1899, followed by a position at Newark (NJ) Public Library. The remainder of her career was spent at Brooklyn Public Library.

As one of the pioneers in children's librarianship, she was known for organizing a chain of children's rooms linked by specially trained children's librarians. This was especially significant because during her thirty-six years at the library, there was no central library or central children's room.



Clara Whitehill Hunt (left) and Grace Donaghy, Flatbush (NY) Branch, June 1936. Photo courtesy Brooklyn Public Library, Center for Brooklyn History.

Hunt's opportunity to create special rooms for children and their librarians was heightened by the construction of the Carnegie Libraries in the early 1900s. An excellent example of Hunt's influence survives in the form of a memo that details her extensive notes about the construction of the Brownsville Junior branch, which opened as the Stone Avenue Branch in 1914 as the first public library devoted to children and was designed in the Arts and Crafts style.¹

Hunt considered layout and design of the public areas and staff work rooms, lighting, air flow, and heating. She requested special accommodations for children including "high-spiked iron fence, [with] rails so near together that small [children] could not squeeze between;" a reference desk no higher than



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36 inches “in order that children may see and be seen over the top; push button for electric bells, lights, and telephones “absolutely out of reach of children,” and no turnstiles in the children’s room because she thought they would be dangerous with swarms of children.”²

She also asked for woodwork or columns that extended high enough so that “dirty hands cannot reach plaster. And while she insisted on a large amount of windows for the children’s room, she asked that they would be installed above the shelving which was five feet tall. She was concerned with preventing books being handed or tossed out the window if children could reach them.

An Unusual Request

Curiously, Hunt expressly requested that children should never be allowed to use public restrooms, “except under such supervision as we cannot spare assistants to give.”³

In fact, she advocated saving money by not installing a public restroom or installing only a small one in the basement. She also demanded a real wood-burning fireplace. Hunt saw the children’s room as a surrogate home for young readers at a time when children needed an environment where they could express themselves in a friendly atmosphere.

Hunt went on to establish a well-regarded children’s librarian training program at Brooklyn Public Library. In 1926, she wrote, “There exists in America—and in few other countries—a profession young in years but of such lusty growth that its demand for workers far exceeds the supply: a profession peculiarly adapted to young women who love children and books and who care more about helping to make the world a happier place than about acquiring a large bank account.”⁴

She cared deeply about the welfare of children and selecting the best reading choices to inspire their young minds. The topic was so important to her that in 1915 she wrote

What Shall We Read to the Children, which became a trusted resource for families, and included chapters on poetry, fairy tales, fiction, nonfiction, travel, and occupations. It included advice on the importance of reading to babies.

Hunt wrote, “Your baby is a live bundle of curiosity. If you begin now to answer his questions as fully as he desires, you will be opening avenues of interest that will give him delight during his whole life.”⁵

On the subject of making good influences in reading, Hunt emphasized, “We need not dole out to little children tiny sugar pellets of information on rigidly limited subjects, but that if we choose pictures of vivid story-telling quality, we can use them as points of departure.”⁶

She suggested a list of books to purchase for a home library, but also included a strong reminder that borrowing books from the library increases the range of books available to children.

She wrote extensively in *Library Journal* and *The Brooklyn Eagle* about the topic of quality children’s books. In 1922 in honor of Children’s Book Week, she noted that “beautiful and wholesome books for children are published every year, yet thousands of American parents who can perfectly well afford the best, every year buy poor books. These parents do not realize that a long, continued diet of mediocre reading will weaken a child’s mental powers and ruin his appetite for good books. They do not see that the child allowed to indulge in the cheap series habit becomes a sort of cheap psychological dope fiend. Of course, some strong-brained children break away from a trash-reading period, just as they emerge unharmed from the diseases of childhood.”⁷ &

The Clara Whitehill Hunt Collection of Children’s Literature at Brooklyn Public Library encompasses thirteen thousand books, pamphlets, and periodicals, dating from 1741 to the 1950s. It can be viewed by appointment only (<https://www.bklynlibrary.org/hunt/about.html>).

Clara’s Works

In addition to collecting children’s literature, Clara Whitehill Hunt authored five books.

- *What Shall We Read to the Children?*, 1915
- *About Harriet*, 1916
- *The Little House in the Woods*, 1918
- *Peggy’s Playhouses*, 1924
- *The House in Green Valley*, 1932



References

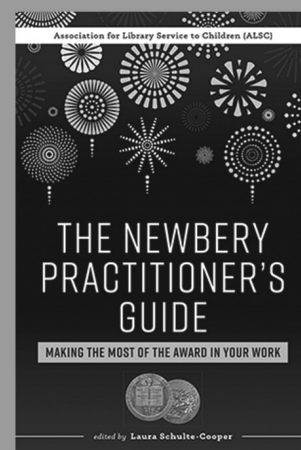
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5. Clara Whitehill Hunt, *What Shall We Read to the Children?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 41.
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The Newbery Practitioner's Guide digs in and explores where the Newbery Award intersects with library work in a range of areas such as collection policy, advocacy, programming, EDI efforts, and censorship.

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